

2018

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Recommended Citation

Piantaggini, Lance (2018) "Building Rhythmic Fluency," *New England Classical Journal*: Vol. 45 : Iss. 1 , 33-38.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj/vol45/iss1/6>

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ABSURDITY

I love scansion, but it makes no sense; scansion is an absurd practice. If I'm the first to tell you, have mercy on this messenger. If you already knew the truth, then rally with me and change the teaching of Latin poetry for the better. I'll present a simple alternative to silly scansion shortly, but first, why bother? Yes, why bother attacking a tried and true practice? My reasons are simple, and I'll use you, the reader, as an example. I'll guess that your Latin program doesn't begin reading poetry until the third or fourth year of high school. I'll also guess that the process begins with an introduction to scansion and what a dactyl and spondee is, etc. Now, without being snarky, I'll guess that your retention rates for years three and four are less than 50%, and given national averages, that's on the high end. Even if I'm way off on that last guess, and you're fairly proud of your high numbers, you probably can't say that *all* of your students will experience Latin poetry. I am writing this *rātīō* to tell you there's a way to introduce poetry in the first year, encouraging inclusion (not exclusion). Would you like to know more? Read on.

MACRONS

To understand everything outlined in this article, we must first begin with macrons. Simply put, use them, always. To dispel one argument against them, modern iOS devices and PC keyboard languages, such as Maori, allow for easy input of

macrons (the extra second will pay off). To dispel another argument, the purists claiming inauthenticity or “crutch” status of macrons ought to begin the school year with “CAECILIVSESTPATER.” This is an exaggeration, I know, but follow the logic and it makes sense to stick with the MOST understandable (read: comprehensible) way to present Latin to students. A macron is a simple feature that increases comprehension. Now, if Latin class is primarily taught in English (yes, there is an increasing number of Latin classes being taught IN Latin, the target language), there is even more of a need to use macrons. How else will students know how to pronounce¹ a word? They can’t rely on English since the language is not quantitative, and they certainly aren’t hearing it from a textbook. The nifty pronunciation guide at the beginning of most textbooks might be consulted by students from time to time, but not often enough to acquire “an ear” for the language. Readers of Latin poetry know this is crucial. Now, onto scansion!

SCANSION VS. MUSIC

Traditional scansion marks both long and short syllables in superscript (above the line of Latin). There is absolutely no conceivable way to rationalize this practice, and surely it was developed because someone didn’t understand music. Since scansion represents a rhythm, and the rhythm of Latin is comprised of EITHER long OR short syllables, why mark both!? That’s right, people have been notating twice as many syllables than they needed to since Latin ceased to be understood, by most, as a spoken language. The parallel I draw is to musical notation. Music requires a complex system of symbols to represent all of the possible note values. There are only two in Latin; long or short. A well-trained performer of Latin poetry can stretch rhythms to include “long, longer, short, and shorter,” but this is a higher level of poetic performance which deserves its own treatment elsewhere. I am writing this to arm readers with a simple tool that focuses more on natural language and less on abstract notation.

1 We should not be concerned with difference in consonants (e.g. “v” as “w” or “c” as “k”), rather, the length of syllables only.

SIMPLIFIED SCANSION

Once the persistent use of macrons is adopted (I call this step o), there is really only one thing to do, which is to underline any other long syllable according to the rules of prosody (i.e. diphthongs,² two consonant rule). When we compare the two practices, traditional scansion is cluttered, while simplified scansion is clear. Here's an example of that simplified scansion:

arma virumque canō // Trōiae quī p̄rimus ab ōrīs

The railroad track caesura is covered in the next section, but it should be immediately clear how this simplified scansion practice draws attention to the line of Latin itself. In my early days of reciting Latin poetry, I would often recite an entire passage only to realize I had no idea what those perfectly-timed words even meant. The process was much unlike following the bouncing ball during Karaoke since the static symbols on the page diverted much of my attention, not to mention the fact that I didn't actually know the language I was reciting. I was focusing both on the rhythm, AND the decoding; one is challenging enough. It became clear to me that I was paying too much attention to those long and short marks above the Latin instead of just reading the Latin. Since the only thing visibly different from prose is the underlined syllables (provided that one uses macrons, always), there is less of a "transition" to reading Latin poetry. In fact, my first year Latin students underline long syllables whenever we do a dictation, so this "practice" isn't even strange to them. Sure, they could apply the rules of prosody to determine which syllables to underline, but all students have to do is *listen* to how words are pronounced and mark them accordingly. For example, in my classes, there is no mistake that *Magister* is pronounced *maGISSSSSSSSter*. All of the textbooks indicate that a long syllable should be pronounced approximately twice as long as a short syllable. I, however, make it a point to exaggerate long syllables, holding vowels and the first of two consonants splitting syllables for much longer than necessary. The result? I hear students mimicking me... this is a wonderful sign that they're picking up the language. So, am I surprised that my first year Latin students can recite Virgil? Not at all. They are building rhythmic fluency at the same time as their reading fluency increases. With time, they will understand the *Aeneid* without thinking about those dactyls.

2 Diphthongs could be considered long vowels, but are never marked with macrons, thus receive the underline in Simplified Scansion.

NATURAL ACCENTUATION

One benefit of attending to syllable quantity both orally and in writing, is that students will have “picked up” the sounds of Latin words. This means that students will never, ever say *MAGister* with that accent on that first syllable, and as though it were three short syllables, since they will have heard the word pronounced as *maGISSSSSSSSSSter* (with the accent properly on the second to last syllable, and the “s” sound held out), and will have seen it underlined (because it’s long by those two consonants, “s” and “t”). This, of course, requires the teacher to correctly model the rhythm of Latin as the input-provider in the classroom, yet I’ve heard many Latin teachers over the years botch *Magister* without knowing. Consider, then, brushing up on the rules of prosody to make sure you aren’t ignoring some long syllables. For your convenience, the most important rules of accenting are presented below.

What does this all mean? Well, it just so happens that the words in Latin poetry are recited exactly how they are pronounced normally. So, provided that one knows the natural accents, those accents remain the same when recited. When *-que* is added to a word, the accent shifts one syllable towards to the end of the word. This is why we have no problem reciting *viRUMque* in that famous first line of Virgil. Continuing with *Aeneid* 1.1, we accent the first syllable in *CAnō*, because the second-to-last-syllable-unless-short rule still applies (in two syllable words, it just happens to be the first syllable). Furthermore, traditional scansion and attention to individual feet exacerbates the tendency of students to accent the ictus vs. accent. It is the very interplay between ictus and accent that gives Latin poetry a sense of life. Consider the following recitation of *Aeneid* 1.1 with the emphasis, sadly, on the ictus:

ARma viRUMque caNŌ trōIAE quī PRĪmus ab Ōrīs

That line feels heavy, and departs from how we pronounce each word normally. Instead of *CAnoooo*, we have *caNOOOOO*. Instead of *TROOOOOiaeeeeeee*, we have *TroooooIAEEEEEEEE*. Again, if we are making the transition to poetry painless, what better way than to pronounce the words just like we always do? When it comes to natural accentuation, there are no tricks or alternative practices here. This IS how to pronounce poetry!

COLA

Stop teaching dactyls and spondees, and focus on larger “chunks.” We know this is the best strategy to employ in order to read prose fluently, and it most certainly applies to poetry. In poetry, the manageable “chunk” is called the “colon.” There are many articles on what a metrical colon is,³ so there is no need to revisit that topic. The only thing you need to know is that I created my audio files based on the principle of pausing in key moments in both sense and rhythm, recognized by many as defined by the obtuse terms “caesura” and “diaeresis,” which don’t really have a place in a classroom based on delivering understandable (read: comprehensible) messages to students.

EVOLUTION

It’d be hard to find a student who doesn’t, at one point, have earbuds or headphones hanging around their neck, on their head, or within an arm’s reach. Let’s evolve and give kids what they want. Go to magisterp.com and download some audio files, listen to them with your students, recite some Virgil, or Catullus, and get them hooked on Latin poetry. All of these audio files support the use of macrons, natural accentuation, and adherence to cola.

NEXT STEPS

The next steps are to get more understandable Latin poetry into curricula years one and two. There are now two novellas written with poetry understandable to the novice Latin student! *Pisō Ille Poētulus* features 22 lines of dactylic hexameter, and *fragmenta Pisōnis* features 50 lines; 37 dactylic hexameter, 8 hendecasyllables, and 5 scazon/limping iambics. The profession needs more of these novellas—a recent endeavor as of 2015, though long-standing publishers could lend a hand, ensuring that each chapter of [insert textbook here] includes a couple lines of verse that make sense, that students can understand. Until that happens, feel free to go to magisterp.com/rhythmicfluency to print the poetry card game to help students internalize the rhythm that ends a line of dactylic hexameter. At this moment, the vocabulary is keyed to the first four *Capitula* of Oerberg’s *Lingua Latīna Per Sē Illustrāta: Familia Rōmāna*.

3 Mahoney (2014).

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